

# Strange Country "Where Life Dies and Death Lives."

A Wayside Shelter.



WHERE THE REVOLUTIONISTS COME FROM.  
A Roadside House on the Way From Panama  
to Bogota, the Colombian Capital.

The Mammoth Ditch



THROUGH THE MOUNTAIN PASSES.  
Steam Shovels Attacking the Hillsides  
That Must Fall Before the Canal Is  
Completed.

## Panama, Land of Tragic Past and Heedless Present.

In Former Canal Times,  
Scene of a Riot of  
Extravagance.

Where the Fever Stalks,  
Always Claiming Its  
Human Sacrifice.

"When their Eating is over the Men fall to hard drinking. But before they begin the Bridegroom takes their Arms and hangs them to the Ridgepole of the House: For they are very quarrelsome in their Drink. They continue drinking Night and Day, till all the Liquor is spent, which lasts usually 3 or 4 Days. During which some are always drinking, while others are drunk and sleeping. And when all the Drink is out and they have recovered their Senses, they all return to their own Homes."

THIS description of a wedding feast among the aborigines of the Isthmus of Panama was written by Lionel Wafers, a gentleman-adventurer of that time, more than 200 years ago. With the single exception of the sentence describing the return of the merry-makers to their homes, it would apply very well to the lives of the descendants of these gentry and to the mixed race that has succeeded to their heritage at the heedless present. The fashion now is for those who have feasted not to return home; on the almost invariable contrary they secure a permanent berth in the large and commodious cemeteries that are so conveniently at hand.

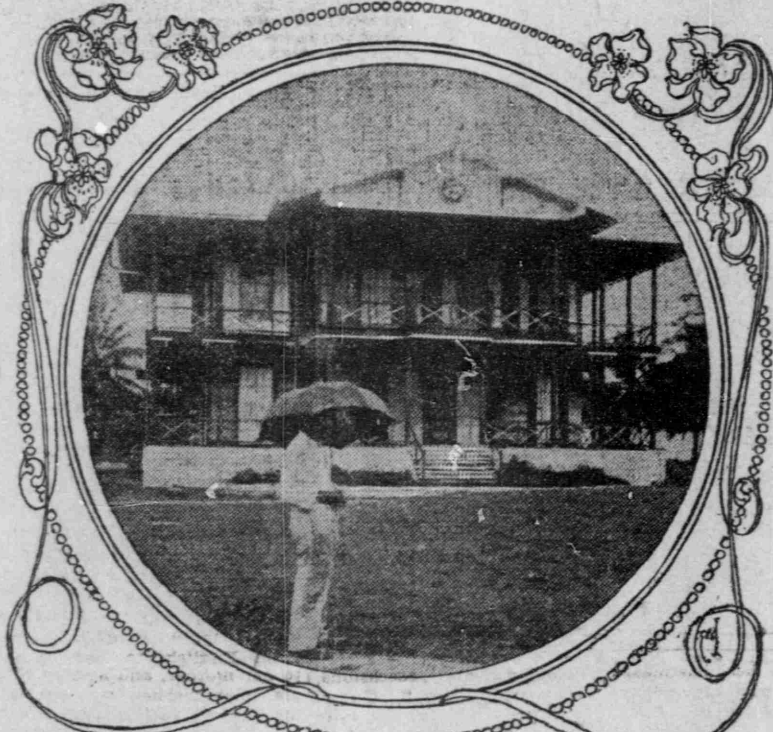
### Life Dies, Death Lives.

"In Panama life dies and death lives," says an axiom of the people, and not only has actual physical life perished, but ambitions and ideals, hopes and aspirations, cherished projects of expanding greatness and lofty desires to help and serve a needy people have met the same fate. Failure has brooded over the isthmus with the miasmic vapor of its fevers, and though for a time, in that tropical climate, effort has blossomed into achievement, it was never more than a momentary lapse. Only when Uncle Sam has actually succeeded in building the canal and making the zone of its control decently habitable will the long volume of misfortunes reach its end.

Morals and ethics have ever been at a discount on the isthmus. As the narrative of the veracious Mr. Wafers may be taken to indicate, the Indians who were its original inhabitants were not altogether models of right living. Certainly they learned nothing of the higher life from the Spaniards, for that greedy band of adventurers sold them practically into slavery and ground their blood into the gold sent back to Spain. Sir Henry Morgan and his buccannery, who sacked and destroyed the city in 1671, and other wild spirits, left their impress upon the land. The centuries of Spanish domination riveted the impression upon a foundation peculiarly susceptible to such influences—a mixed race, of white, black, and red, with the vices of each of its constituents and the essential virtues of none.

### Once a Great City.

Time was when Panama was the greatest city on the American continent, and the only settlement of the white race that stood out upon the broad sweep of the Pacific Coast. It was rich in gold and silver, and pearls and rare woods, and in its streets stood some of the most beautiful churches in the world, decked with friezes of gold and ivory and altar cloths that were worth a monarch's ransom. Morgan changed all that, however, and when he and his cutthroats had passed the city was no more. It is five miles away from



WHERE FAMOUS ENGINEER LIVED.  
Isthmian Home of Count Ferdinand de Lesseps at Panama.  
(Photograph copyrighted, 1904, by W. H. Rau.)



IN THE HEART OF THE CITY.  
The Plaza Around Which Panama Is Built, Where Traffic Centers.

the old site that the present city now stands.

Panama has suffered from the causes that are said to undermine the mental and physical health of men—heredity and environment. Its inheritance consists of crime, violence, and rapacity; from the time of its settlement its environment has been all these—and fever.

Fever everywhere and always. It is said that when the old Panama Canal was in process of construction, under the guidance of De Lesseps, one of the principal topics of discussion among the leading officials was the relative disadvantage of bilious fever, remittent fever, Chagres fever, yellow fever, and fever and ague. Each had its ardent champions, but the fever itself played no favorites, striking down with an equal and impartial hand. One understands something of the constant terror when it is said that in five months the mortality among the engineers and other chiefs of construction was 83 per cent. When the Panama Railroad was being built a pessimistic wit remarked that every stranger was a coffin. The exaggeration was not great.

### Waste Was Everywhere.

During the De Lesseps regime waste was rampant—the very order of the day. Thousands of tons of squared stone, that had been brought from France for the purpose of building the walls that were to keep the unruly Chagres in its place, were thrown into the sea at Colon.

The stone represented an outlay of probably \$300,000. Valuable machinery was dumped into the harbor or thrown out from the cars, not even unboxed. Amiable contractors sold unneeded supplies and wasted fat; so, perhaps, did the officials of the company who directed the purchases.

The engineers lived in houses built at enormous expense and fitted up with every requisite of modern luxury. They drank like fish—and died like sheep. Disipation vied with prodigality of expenditure and carelessness of waste. It was a saturnalia in which Panama fairly revelled; it was the sort of thing she had known recurrently during her three centuries of existence. It was an incident only that when the canal was supposed to be practically finished, and the official bulletins had so announced, the work had, in sober reality, been scarcely begun.

### Streets Ran With Gold.

The people, in dirty, hot, and miasmic Colon, live on the memories of her past greatness, when "canal money" was spent with a lavish hand. Those were the good old days, the survivors of that generation love to remember. The little bank of Colon had packed away 8,000,000 francs in its coffers, and the safes in the canal company's offices were lined with gold.

Every cafe and drinking place was a gold mine in embryo. The Gringos drank and paid, and died, and more came—so

that it was very well for the good people of the town—very well, indeed. They flourished in a way that would have made the green bay tree of the proverb madly jealous; they flouished, in fact, like the vegetation in their own jungles or an epidemic of their own special brands of fever. Graves were kept open in the cemeteries, ready dug for the army for whom they waited; to be an undertaker was a mark and indication of financial standing.

Balls were held every night, when wine flowed like water—"like the waters of the Chagres in the rainy season, senior," and a band of twenty trained musicians, imported from France, and replenished as needed developed, furnished music. The women threw handfuls of gold and silver to the dusty populace outside, for the mere pleasure of seeing the scramble that always ensued. Sarah Bernhardt came and played to an enraptured audience, that paid from \$10 to \$25 for seats and packed the house.

### Masses But Half Civilized.

As in the other Spanish-American countries there is on the isthmus an ascendant aristocracy of white blood, or something that approximates it. The masses of the people are blends of every race on earth, including the Chinese, and a competent authority had described them "as little better than semi-civilized when sober and absolute savages when drunk." Sobriety, as some one else has said, in another connection, "is not, so to speak, their habit." Machetes play a prominent part in the social drama, being equally useful for building a house, supplying the omnipresent need for strong drink, and avenging an injury. They are said to make excellent practice for the surgeons, in the occasional instances where the undertaker is not the person called. As an ally of the fever they do yeoman's service.

Bullfighting and revolutions are the two principal amusements, taking place usually on alternate Sunday afternoons. An especially strong and active bull and an extraordinary popular and engaging general of the army will divide the plaudits of the mob impartially. The mob likes them both, though its true sentiment, possibly, is slightly in favor of the bull. Revolutions, indeed, have become tame, and your true citizen of the isthmus insists there shall be at least a certain amount of fireworks and oratory. Otherwise he is apt to criticize the performance harshly and to say it lacks color. There was the last one, for instance, that no one knew anything about until it was all over.

### Deaths of the Coolies.

They tell a story of 800 Chinese, who were brought from Hongkong to work on the Panama Railroad, almost every one of whom fell a victim either to the rigors of the country or the cupidity of the contractors.

The usual roseate pictures had been

constructed by the agents, who secured their employment in their native China, in order to induce them to make the trip. They were promised wages that to Hongkong coolies seemed boundless wealth and comforts they had never known. Whatever vagaries the climate possessed were kept, as to them, in the mysterious background; of these nothing was said.

They endured the discomforts of the voyage cheerfully, or at least stoically. Some ten or a dozen died en route and were thrown to the fishes, but their comrades probably regarded this as a thing ordained, and made no murmur. Panama was reached, the party was disembarked and work on the railway construction was begun.

Then the Chinese began to die, as well of the pangs of homesickness and the deprivation of their remedy for it—opium—as of the fevers of the country. In a panic, began to deal out opium. They were a recurrence of cheer and a decrease in the death rate, but this was suffered to last only for a time. It occurred to the contractors it was wicked and unholly to pandor to a depraved taste for the seductive drug and to permit their fellow-mortals to ruin themselves by its use.

### Expense Induced Reform.

It may also have occurred to them that the practice was expensive, for each of the Chinamen was accustomed to consume each day opium of the value of 15 cents. Multiplied by many hundred Chinamen and many days' work this represented a large sum.

At any rate the issue of opium was stopped. The coolies were caught and held in the meshes of despair. The fever carried many of them away and those who managed to resist its death-dealing power sought death in other ways. Some impaled themselves on the tools with which they did their daily toil; others tied heavy stones to their garments and flung themselves into the waters of the streams; others sat calmly by the seashore until the tide came in and blotted them out forever; still others bargained for death with their fellows, yielding their every possession to him who would administer the thrust that would end their miseries.

By fever or their own hand or that of one of their fellows practically all of them died. It was one of the tragedies of the isthmus.

### Isthmian Not Strenuous.

Your typical isthmian is not ambitious of work—certainly not of the type that involves the construction of railways and the digging of ditches. It may be that a certain prudene shields him from ambitions of this sort—that he understands that to delve in malarial jungles, where the upturned earth releases germs by the airy billion is conducive neither to health nor to longevity. At

any rate, he does not care for the work, and as long as he can exist on the bounty of the more strenuous or supply them with food and drink at the usual isthmian prices he is very substantially content. The native contributions to the working forces on the canal have not been large.

For this reason importation has been necessary, an importation which has taken the form of Jamaican negroes and Chinese coolies. Treated well and permitted to live in accordance with their own ideas they have managed to turn the trick, to do effective work and to survive. The Chinese are perhaps the more desirable, for the Jamaican negro, working on a Panama ditch, is not altogether a model of industry, even though he be urged along by the ornate vocabulary of a foreman selected on this very account of command of tongues. Without such incentive to effort his mind is usually concentrated on things afar off.

### Resort of Adventurers.

Come also into this region of adventure bizarre adventurers from every land. Many come in the enthusiasm of youth, lured by romance, enraptured by tales of sudden wealth; others of a stern sort seek the pelf the isthmus has generally yielded to the unscrupulous and denied to the honest; still others seek oblivion and peace—the forgetfulness of the people where they have spent their lives, not seldom escape from the far-reaching hand of the law.

That the isthmians are essentially revolutionists is not, perhaps, altogether strange. The revolutionist is a profound optimist, whose attitude of mind is not that things might be worse, which in this world is usually the accurate conclusion—but that, assuredly, they are as bad as they can possibly be and for this reason any change must be for the better. It is the theory from which have evolved the hordes of flat money, free silver, and other political panaceas of the centuries. It is the mental refuge of desperation.

That it should obtain on the isthmus, be it said again, is not remarkable, for that one should be desperate there is very conceivable. Since its written history began it has been the prey of the political game in the New World, moved hither and yon, and bartered for a piece of higher price as the players have decreed. When it has exchanged one form of government for another, it has found itself, it is true, out of the frying pan, but in the fire. The fire, also, has not been more enduringly comfortable. Hence the efforts to get back into the frying pan.

### Patriots With Bank Accounts.

The patriots their countrymen have hailed as deliverers and liberators have usually turned out very sorry rogues after all, with an infinite lust for gain and an insatiable fondness for the flesh-

pots, as they exist on the boulevards of Paris. On the boulevards, by the way, some of these patriots now make their headquarters, having a well-founded objection to returning to their own country. They cherish a fear of encountering some old neighbor with a long memory and a machete—and the conjunction would probably prove disagreeable. They having solved life's riddle very satisfactorily, stay where they are.

### Panama in a Phrase.

"In Panama," said one of the disgusted, "the flowers have no fragrance, the fruit has no flavor, the women have no virtue and the men have no honor."

Of course it is a libel, but it illustrates an attitude of mind to which the great majority come. Panama certainly does not appeal to the decent white man who desires the opportunity to make, in reasonable peace, an honest living. He endures it as long as he can; then, if he does not die, goes home. He is fortunate if he brings back either the code of morality with which he started or the sound and healthy body which made it possible to live up to it.

So that Uncle Sam has a weary work ahead of him, not alone in building the canal, but in reclaiming the country and reforming its people. That sanitary precautions are to be taken to reduce the danger of infection has been decided upon already, as was a foregone conclusion from the first. It is almost equally certain that the work of reformation will be begun with the digging, for to reform some one else is a thing Uncle Sam dearly loves to do. He comes by the inclination naturally. John Bull has been at it ever since he began to send his sons to found colonies beyond the seas.

### Success Will Mean Much.

It is to be hoped the effort will be successful. The land in Panama is of the richest in the world, producing every form of vegetation, almost without effort, and in tropical profusion. Its unhealthiness is due more to the slovenly habits of the people and their disregard of every principle of sanitation and hygiene than to any reason inherent in the climate. Uncle Sam is to teach this to the natives; when he has succeeded he will have to his credit another work, quite as prodigious and important and to his credit as will be the construction of the canal itself.

Great things are expected of the United States, when the construction of the canal is begun, but natives of this country and the isthmus do not regard the situation from exactly the same point of view. Uncle Sam sees advancing civilization and commercial and political progress and better health in the prospect; the gentleman from Panama or Colon sighs for the time when money was plentiful and looks out into the hopeful future with a cheery smile. He wants the money turned loose again.